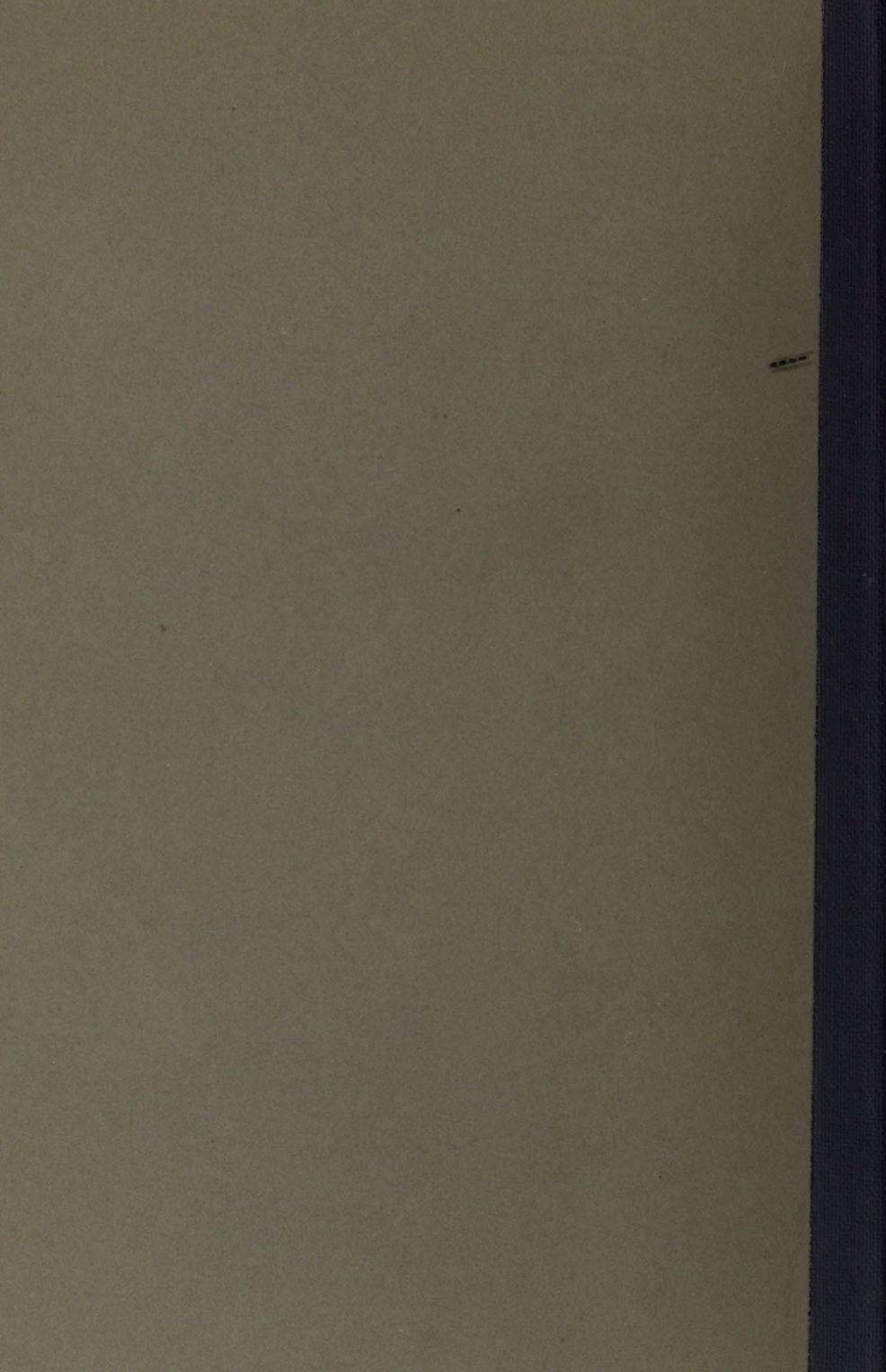
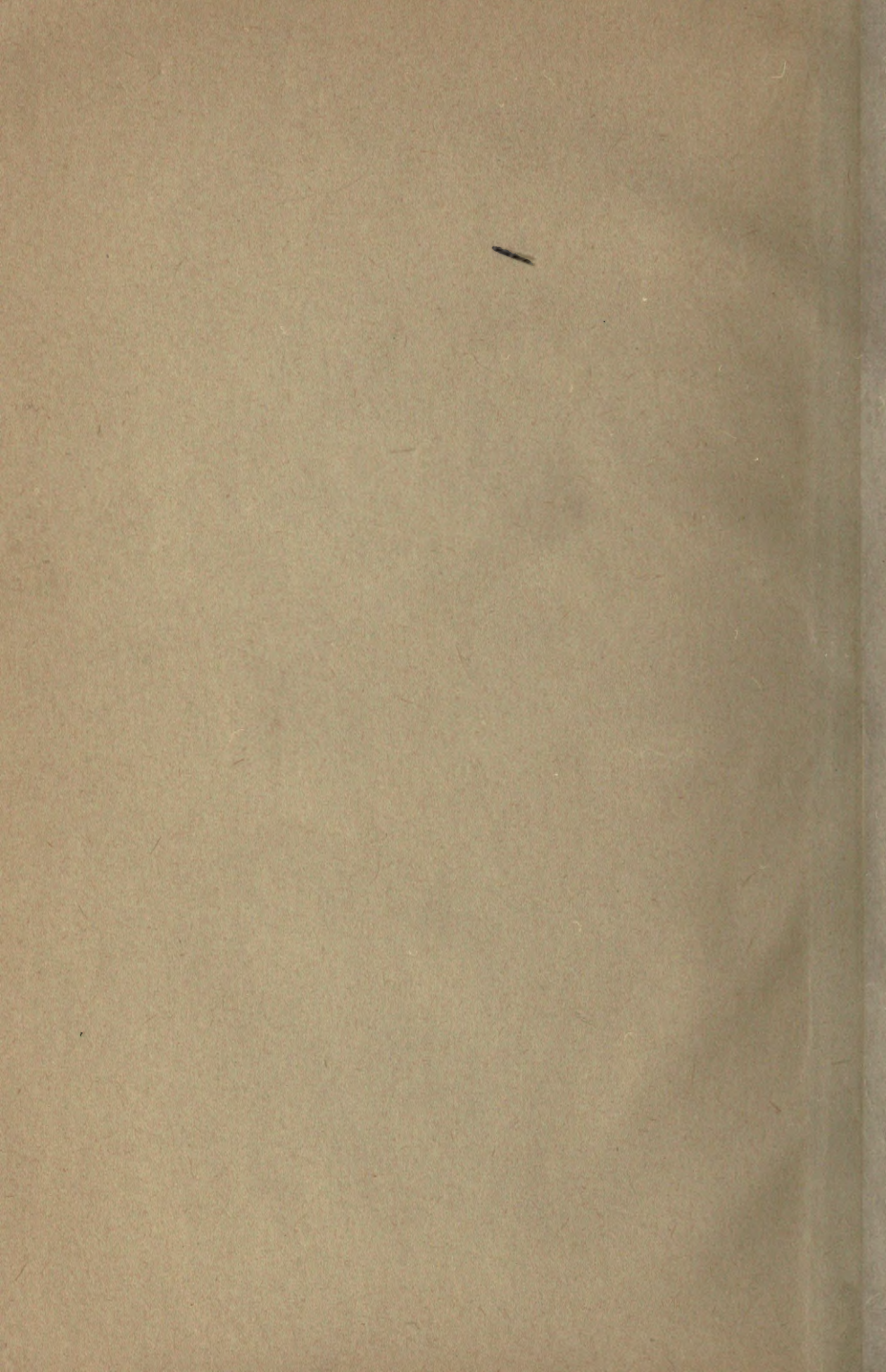


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The Revolution and the stage
in France.





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The Revolution and the Stage in France.

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WHETHER the dull and prosaic House of Hanover gave but little state support to the theatre, or whether it be that the Puritan triumph in the Revolution was even more complete and enduring than is generally supposed, it is certain that for some two centuries the stage has played a much less important part in English public life than in French. Even now, there is usually some political play among the bones of contention in Parisian society—for example, the two latest original plays brought out at the Français, *L'Ami Fritz* and *Jean Dacier*, awoke great discussion on political and very little on literary grounds; and the success of Sardou's brilliant *Rabagas* is not yet forgotten—nor forgiven.

And as the struggles of to-day are calm compared with the fight to the death of the first Revolution, we may expect that even *Rabagas* did not hit so hard as some of its predecessors of eighty years ago. It seems, perhaps, strange that English writers on French history have taken so little notice of the part played by the stage in the crisis of the first great series of struggles—say from 1789 to 1795; but their neglect is no doubt due to the fact that in England the influence and use of the theatre have for a very long time been underrated by serious writers. A revolution in a country where the drama is a power is sure to be heralded, and to be fought for and against, on the stage; and if it were not so in our English revolution, it was that the actors were all, and naturally, banded against the friends and supporters of Prynne, were crushed when the Parliament won, and earlier in the struggle could perhaps hardly have added to the constant ridicule and abuse which they had long poured upon "citizens" and Puritans—as distinguished from fine Court gentlemen.

In France it was different. Not only were the grumblings which preceded the final crash echoed in the comedies of the latter half of the eighteenth century—it has often been said the Revolution began in the *Mariage de Figaro*—but there exists a distinct revolutionary theatre: the *Charles IX* and *Tibère* of Marie-Joseph Chénier, *L'Ami des Lois* of Laya, *Le Vous et le Toi* of Aristide Valcour, and very many other pieces of greater or less importance; * and each party thought it necessary more than once to put down with a high hand such demonstrations of its opponents. It is most interesting to notice how the thin line

* A collection of the most characteristic of these works has just been published by M. Louis Moland. Many curious facts which I shall quote are taken from it, as are most of the plays I shall criticise.

of political plays follows the stream of popular thought, allying itself as a rule, with the side of humanity, whether that side be for the moment protesting against the oppression of kings, or the unmeasured cruelty of their destroyers; though now and again it becomes the mouthpiece of popular passion freed from its cruel chains, or the expression of the contempt felt even by the poorest honest folk for the scum of *parvenus* who (and it was only natural) rivalled the vices of the aristocrats and burlesqued their follies. Every bend in the course of the stream is indicated by these odd little works of a rather tawdry art, which have not yet altogether sunk, but may indicate to us where the currents raged most fiercely. Take the plays in M. Moland's well-chosen collection. Kings are schooled in *Charles IX*; the downfall of the priestly power is hailed with triumph in *Les Victimes Cloîtrées*; the misgivings of the Girondists find a voice in *L'Ami des Lois*; a yell of exultation at the punishment of tyranny rises from *Le Jugement Dernier des Rois*; *L'Intérieur des Comités Révolutionnaires* is a breath of relief after a briefer but even more terrible oppression; and lastly, in *Madame Angot*, quieter times returning, plain citizens are able to enjoy a laugh at those of their fellows whose sudden rise to prosperity has turned their heads.

A fair idea of what was the influence of the stage at this period, its nature and extent, can hardly be given more briefly or more effectively than by sketching these few representative plays, their character, the circumstances of their production, and their reception by the public, and by the successive governments of the time. Of their literary merits it will naturally not be needful to say much—one does not expect in *pièces de circonstance* great polish of dialogue or care in construction. Perhaps, however, the plays are, on the whole, rather better than one would be inclined to expect. The author of *Charles IX* was of course a man of high and genuine culture—the brother of perhaps the most classical poet France has ever produced. *Les Victimes Cloîtrées* is quite up to the average of melodramas—in conception of character even rises above it; and in both *L'Intérieur des Comités Révolutionnaires* and *Madame Angot* there is genuine humour. Great originality, of course, one does not look for in such pieces; and it is quite as well that one should not. It is noticeable that not one of these plays is by a dramatist of any note—even Chénier hardly enters the second rank of French tragedians.

Without more preface, then, let me give some description of each of these very different dramas, taking them in the chronological order already given, rejecting the consideration of others of their kind, not that they lack interest, but that a selection must be made, and that these seem the most fully illustrative of the different phases of the Revolution. Speaking very roughly, they may be said to represent the views of one or other party during the periods when Mirabeau, Danton, Marat, Robespierre, and the Directory were in power. When the first,

Charles IX was produced, Mirabeau's was so completely the ruling influence, that on the occasion of its first performance, all the *côté gauche* of the Assembly being present, he was compelled by the audience to leave his seat and take up a commanding position in a box, as a sort of president; and shortly afterwards he demanded a special performance of "the patriotic tragedy" as a kind of national rejoicing.

It will be inferred from the fact that the Republican party attended, almost officially, the first performance, that the play had made some stir before it was actually produced. A public agitation for its performance was, in fact, got up, and Bailly, mayor of Paris, on referring the matter to the Assembly, declared that had he been master, he would not have permitted it—that "when the people was aroused, not against the king, but against arbitrary power, it was not the moment to expose on the stage the most frightful abuse of that power." But the committee of three appointed by the Assembly to read the piece licensed it, and its production (on November 4, 1789) was an immense triumph for its author, Marie-Joseph Chénier, to whom a civic crown was even voted by some districts. The actors were cheered, literally to the echo—for one speech was encored, and had to be repeated before the play could proceed; it was the long harangue of the Chancelier de l'Hôpital, at the end of which, in sixteen lines added by the author shortly before the performance, he predicts the rise of the Republic, the freeing of the people. One young actor also found in this play the first opportunity of showing his true power—the great Talma. He played the king, and, we are told, represented wonderfully his weakness, his struggles, his final remorse—for Chénier, opposing the view of some historians, has made his hero repentant. "Mahomet, Henry the Eighth, *Cromwell*, were villains without remorse," he says in a note, "but irresolution before a crime is the sure sign of repentance after it." The sentence sounds strange from a Republican—Mr. Carlyle's work was evidently needed in France as well as at home.

For the play itself, there is not very much to be said about it. It is of the usual order of French tragedies, before Victor Hugo changed such things from respectable essays in declamation to fiery melodramas. With a singular want of action, it describes the Massacre of St. Bartholomew; its verse is often eloquent, but its plot is, especially if we consider the subject, astonishingly dull. The portraits of the different characters are fairly interesting, though a casual observer would say that the one prominent feature in each was a tendency to make very long speeches. Chénier has drawn with some care, as he tells us himself, the character of the king, irresolute, timid, and cruel; the sombre and perfidious policy of Catherine of Medicis; the pride and the ambition of the Duc de Guise; the same pride and the same ambition, wearing the mask of a hypocritical zeal for the Catholic faith, in the Cardinal of Lorraine; and has opposed to these the proud and intrepid loyalty of Coligni, the noble candour of his pupil, the young King of Navarre (afterwards

Henri IV), and the fine sense of the Chancelier de l'Hôpital. As a literary work, the play is probably inferior to Chénier's *Tibère*; but the latter was never acted, while the former in a moment made the author from a nobody—he was only known hitherto by two failures—into a great man.

The piece was, of course, a great theatrical success, and was played for some time to crowded audiences; but there was an influence at work against it which the author could not have foreseen. A large proportion of the company of the Comédie Française—the majority, indeed—was in no way enthusiastic about the Revolution; and after the play had been performed thirty-two times they succeeded in obtaining its withdrawal from the bill. Chénier and his friends, naturally indignant, tried every way to force them to continue the representations, and the result was a very pretty “scene in the house.”

The curtain had but just risen when a M. Sarrazin got up, and asking for silence, read a request that *Charles IX* might be performed. This had been anticipated, and Naudet (one of the reactionary members of the *troupe*) advanced to the footlights and spoke as follows. “You cannot doubt, gentlemen, that the Comédie Française is always anxious to do what it can to please you, but it is impossible to perform *Charles IX*, as Madame Vestris is ill, and M. de Saint-Prix confined to his bed by an erysipelas of the leg.”

Here the speaker hoped that the matter was ended, but to his surprise Talma, who led the Republican section of the company, came forward from the “wings,” and said, “I will answer for Madame Vestris, gentlemen; she will play—she will give you that proof of her patriotism and zeal; the part of the Cardinal shall be read, and you shall have *Charles IX*.”

They had *Charles IX*; but Naudet's indignation at the promise found vent in a hearty box on the ear for Talma, as he retired behind the scene. This was atoned for by the immense applause the actor received at the performance, which took place on July 24, 1790; but the struggle was only commencing, and before it finished broke up the company, of which the Democratic party quitted the theatre (then in the Faubourg St. Germain), and established itself in the now famous Rue de Richelieu. One finds nearly all the great names on the Republican side—Talma, Grandmesnil, Monvel, Dugazon, Madame Vestris, &c.; of the Royalists, the chief were Fleury, Dazincourt, Mesdames Contat (Louise and Emilie) Lange, and Rancourt. It was the latter *troupe* which brought out, not so long afterwards, the reactionary *Ami des Lois*, already mentioned, which gained them the honour of a political prison.

Earlier than this, however, and just before the rupture in the company, the comedians of the Français had produced, with immense success, a melodrama exposing the abuses of the Romish Church; I may note that, oddly enough, all the principal parts in it were played by what I

have called the reactionary section of the company. The play was, however, written by Monvel, one of Talma's Republican associates, and was certainly in no way favourable to the falling side.

It was called *Les Victimes Cloîtrées*, and the story was briefly this :—A silly and superstitious mother and a too easy father leave their child, a young girl, at the convent of the town in which they live, while they go for a time to Paris. The girl, Eugénie de St. Alban, is betrothed to a friend of the family, named Dorval, young and very rich ; he inquires after her constantly, and soon learns, to his horror, that she is unwell—seriously ill—in a few days, when he insists on seeing her, dead. He is told by the Père Laurent, confessor of the St. Albans and head of a monastery which adjoins the convent, that her illness was infectious, and that for this reason she was allowed to see no one, and it was necessary to bury her with the greatest haste. He is utterly crushed by the stroke, and Père Laurent has little difficulty in making him resolve to give up the world (and his wealth—to the monastery), and take up his abode in a dwelling where he will, at least, be always near the remains of his beloved. The play is filled with the struggle between the Père Laurent, a second Tartuffe, and Francheville, a manly friend of Dorval, each doing all he can to influence the young man's decision—the one to confirm, the other to shake it. This struggle culminates in a scene, in which Francheville's honest indignation has all but conquered, when Dorval's mind, cunningly enfeebled by long isolation and a continued strain of exaggerated feeling, gives way for the time, and he yields entirely to Père Laurent. Immediately after this, however, the one good monk of the community, the Père Louis, contriving to speak to Dorval, reveals to him the horrible villany of Laurent, who, failing to seduce the young girl, Eugénie, had resolved by her death to obtain a mastery over Dorval's feelings, and ultimately over his property.

Dorval's want of self-control at once betrays to Laurent his knowledge of this frightful secret ; and the poor boy is gagged and thrown into a vault under the monastery, just by the wall which divides it from the convent. He is sinking down, overcome by despair, when to his horror he finds that is resting upon a corpse. Looking more closely, he discovers upon the floor, traced in letters of blood, these words : *During the twenty years that I have been perishing here, I have succeeded in detaching a bar of iron which fastened this tomb to the wall.* Dorval snatches up the bar, and, following further directions which he finds, attempts to force aside a large stone in the wall. It yields ; another and another soon follow, and in a few moments he has forced his way into an adjoining cell, in every way like his own. Here he finds a prisoner—a woman, who has fainted and lies insensible ; as will be guessed, it is Eugénie, condemned by Père Laurent to this most lingering and horrible of deaths. The lovers, thus reunited in their prison, enjoy a brief moment of happiness ; then they hear coming steps, and Dorval again seizes the iron, determined at all events to die fighting. But their fears are needless : it is the Père Louis and Francheville, who come to succour them, armed

with the power of the State—for liberty has just triumphed, and the tyranny of the Church fallen (as they hope) for ever.*

In this play, the character of Dorval is drawn with more than ordinary truth and power, and most of the others are firmly and clearly sketched; but it was not, of course, the literary merit of the piece which secured its success. It came at a very opportune moment, and may be said to have satisfied a popular need—or at least to have supplied a vent for popular emotion, which was further excited by an incident of (I believe) the first representation. When, in the third act, Père Laurent gave the order to drag Dorval away, a man in the audience leapt up, crying, "Slay that villain!" For the moment he seemed almost mad; then, composing himself, he turned to those whom his sudden action had startled, and said, "Pardon me, gentlemen, but I was a monk myself; like Dorval, I have been thrown into a dungeon; and I thought I recognised, in Père Laurent, my old Superior!" Whether this interruption was genuine, or was only a cleverly got up "sensation," it had its effect, and all Paris went to see *Les Victimes Cloîtrées*.

It is not necessary to notice the many slight theatrical sketches of these years, which refer only to some one event just happening—as, for example, *Le Vous et le Toi*, of Aristide Valcour (*représenté en Frimaire, l'an deuxième de la République Française une et indivisible*), which makes some fun of the legal substitution of the singular pronoun for the plural in all cases, but which heartily approves of the change. An earlier work of rather more importance was the *Nicodème dans la Lune* of "Cousin Jacques" (Beffroy de Reigny), produced in 1790, and played, altogether, more than four hundred times; it represented the most liberal of Royalist views—in fact, the beginning of Moderate Republicanism; and, like some of the plays of Valcour, it introduced a good *curé*, who was contrasted with the rich and unscrupulous bishops. Other political plays of these authors were very popular—noticeably a little one-act sketch *Allons, ça va: ou le Quaker en France*, which was simply a patriotic and spirited appeal to the warlike feeling of the nation—but these are hardly so typical of the progress and variation of opinion as those M. Moland has chosen as specimens.

L'Ami des Lois, the third play in his collection, was politically the most important of all. It was produced at the very central moment of the strife between the Mountain and the Gironde, January 2, 1793, exactly five months before the final fall of the latter body; and it deserves to be numbered among their supreme efforts. As a dramatic work, it is extremely poor—a commonplace five-act comedy in verse, with a commonplace aristocratic hero, and a very commonplace Democratic villain (said to be meant for Robespierre); but as a political manifesto,

* In 1790, the National Assembly had refused to recognise Catholicism as the State religion, had abolished monastic vows, suppressed all orders and congregations, except those charged with the succour of the sick, and decreed the civil constitution of the clergy, &c., &c.—*Moland*.

its value became at once evident, while its reception showed how large was the party still tainted with the sin of *modérantisme*. "Before three o'clock," we are told,* "all the streets near the Comédie Française were crowded with spectators from every part of the capital." The moderate journals spoke very highly of the play, and in the theatre "all the passages against anarchy excited the liveliest enthusiasm, and the author, called for at each performance, came forward to receive the applause of an audience in the highest excitement."

That the play should be denounced at the Club of the Jacobins, and at the Commune, followed almost as a matter of course. Robespierre spoke of the Théâtre Français as "the loathsome haunt of the aristocracy, and the insulter of the Revolution." The representations were suspended by the order of the Commune; the suspension was negatived by the Convention (in which the Girondists had still a constantly-decreasing majority); and this happened twice. On the first suspension a clamorous crowd went to the theatre, and, though the house was surrounded with troops, demanded the performance of the piece. Santerre, who appeared in uniform and tried to crush the riot, was greeted with cries of, "Turn him out! Silence! Down with the beery General!" (he was a brewer.) The Mayor of Paris interfered, but with little more success; and Laya, the author of the comedy, addressed an energetic protest to the legislature. As I have said, the suspension was itself suspended; it was re-enacted by the Commune, and the riotous scenes continued.

After a struggle of some length, the actors were not merely defeated, but imprisoned. The thorough-going Collot d'Herbois (himself once a dramatist) proposed that "the head of the company be guillotined and the rest transported;" but, fortunately, this proposition was not carried out, and the unhappy comedians thrown into prison on the night of September 3 (1793), were only detained there for a few months.

L'Ami des Lois was revived two years after, but was found already to have lost its interest. It was indeed, though rather pretentious in form, merely a *pièce de circonstance*; and must very soon have become on the stage, what it now is to read, a dull specimen of the heaviest order of French verse-comedies—which almost rival in dullness the classical tragedies of their nation. Later, under the Empire and the Restoration, the Censure would not allow the piece to be played; and it is a noteworthy thing that for this comedy, in the very first years of liberty, the oppression of the censorship was revived by the Jacobins—it was decreed that the programme of every week must be submitted to the Commune for its approval; so true is it that a people which is not ready for freedom will be no freer under a republic than under a despotism.

At the end of the year whose beginning was signalised by the production of *L'Ami des Lois*, on October 18, 1793, two days after the

* D'Etienne and Martainville, *Histoire du Théâtre Français*, vol. iii. p. 48.

execution of Marie Antoinette, there appeared on the French stage perhaps the most extraordinary play ever written. The extreme Republican party was in its fullest triumph; the Gironde was no more, monarchy seemed to have passed away for ever like an evil dream; the lowest orders of society, those heretofore slaves, trodden under foot and helpless, leapt up with an enormous shout of joy for their newly-won freedom, of triumph over their shattered enemies—and this play may be called the echo which has come down to us of that shout.

It is, indeed, hardly to be named a play—a political allegory (in one short scene, which would not occupy more than half-an-hour) is a fitter title for it. *Le Dernier Jugement des Rois* merely shows what would happen if all the nations of Europe should rid themselves of their tyrants at one stroke, following the recent example of the French. There is no attempt at dramatic construction or plot; there is only one incident—which finishes the piece certainly as completely as anything could well be finished. It is merely a shout, as I have said—the hymn of praise of brutalised and degraded natures which had but a moment shaken off their fetters: sung to the god, or demon, of revenge, and yet not wanting in noble and loving thoughts—less brutal in spirit, I venture to say, than some utterances of those cultured kings, who for so many years had tried to teach the art of graceful, refined, and even charming wickedness.

The author of this "Prophecy" (so he called it) appealed to the public before his piece was produced, to recognise in it a turning of the tables upon those cruel jesters who had so long made merry at the expense of the poor. "Remember, citizens," he cried, "how in times past, on every stage, they vilified, and degraded, and ridiculed the most respectable classes of the Sovereign-People, for the amusement of kings and their lackeys. I felt that it was full time to do the like to them, and, in our turn, to laugh. Times enough, these gentlemen have had the laughers on their side; I felt that the moment was come to hold them up to public derision, and so to parody a happy line in the comedy of the *Méchant*—

Les rois sont ici bas pour nos menus plaisirs."

And his purpose was fully accomplished. One shudders, I own, at the hideous yell which greets each antic of these burlesqued kings; it is not like the polished smile which appreciated the dull ignorance of *Blaise* and of *Fétu*; but as in coarseness of ridicule the Republican outwent the Royalist satire, so did it in nobility and depth of sentiment.

Sylvain Maréchal, the author, lays his scene in a small volcanic island, inhabited only by ignorant but kindly savages, and by one old Frenchman, transported thither twenty years before, because his daughter was "remarked" by some great nobleman of the court. To this island come, by hazard, twelve or fifteen *sans-culottes*, one from each nation of Europe; they tell the old man that the peoples have resolved to be free, and have assumed as their motto the noble words, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Then they lead on, one by one, their fettered monarchs,

who are doomed to work out the remainder of their lives in this dreary place. Each *sans-culotte* describes his sovereign; each king tries feebly to defend himself.

Says the Englishman, "Here is his Majesty the King, who, helped by the Machiavellian genius of Pitt, drained the purse of the English people, and increased the burden of the public debt, to organise in France civil war, anarchy, famine, and, worst of all, Federalism."

And George replies, "But you know I have lost my wits! You don't punish a lunatic—you put him in an asylum."

"The volcano will bring you to your senses," says the *sans-culotte*.

In like manner is treated each of the others—the kings of Prussia, Spain, Naples, Sardinia, and Poland, the Emperor, and Catherine of Russia; last of all the Pope, who in the most cowardly manner offers to pray for the *sans-culottes* if they will let him go—an offer promptly and contemptuously rejected. Then the chief spokesman of the Republicans, having arranged the kings in a semicircle and called the savages to look at them, gives them "a good talking-to" all round, tells them that the reason they have not been beheaded is that no executioner could be found who would sully his hands with their blood, and finally leaves them to "offer to Europe the spectacle of its tyrants confined in a menagerie and devouring each other, no longer able to wreak their wrath on the brave *sans-culottes* they dared to call their subjects."

Left to themselves, lamentation soon turns to quarrelling, quarrelling to fisticuffs and kicks.

"Good heaven, how they treat us!" cries Francis the Second. "With what indignities! What is to become of us?"

"Ah, my dear Cagliostro," William says. "Why are not you here? You would get us out of the scrape!"

George doubts this. "What do you think of it, Holy Father? You held him prisoner long enough in the Château St. Ange."

"He could do us no good," answers the Pope. "We want supernatural aid."

"Ah, Holy Father," cries the King of Spain. "A little miracle!"

"The time is gone by! Where are the good old days when the saints used to ride-a-cock-horse through the air on walking-sticks?"

"Alas, my cousin, Louis the Sixteenth!" sighs Charles of Spain. "After all, yours was the happiest lot. An unpleasant half-a-quarter-of-an-hour is soon over; now you want for nothing. Here we want everything—we are between famine and hell. It is you, Francis and William, who have brought this upon us. I always thought this French Revolution would play us a nasty trick, sooner or later. We ought never to have meddled with it—never!"

Here the quarrelling begins; accusations and counter-accusations fly about, and Catherine only makes matters worse by a proposition which must really not be transcribed; then she and the Pope have a free fight, "the one with her sceptre, the other with his crozier, which is broken by

a blow from the sceptre ; the Pope throws his tiara at Catherine's head, and knocks off her crown. *They fight with their chains.*" Before the struggle is well over, it is discovered that the King of Spain is eating in the corner a piece of black bread which he had managed to secrete ; the others all rush upon him, and fight for it, the King of Naples exclaiming, " What would the *sans-culottes* say if they saw the kings of Europe disputing a bit of black bread ! "

The gentlemen referred to appear, and answer by giving the hungry monarchs a barrel of biscuits, saying, like Timon, " Stay, brutes, here's provender. Stuff yourselves. The proverb which says ' Everybody must live ' was not made for you, for there is no necessity for kings to live. But the *sans-culottes* are as susceptible of pity as of justice. Feed on this ship's biscuit, till you are acclimatised to the country."

He goes ; the kings throw themselves upon the food, and dispute eagerly for the lion's share—when an eruption of the volcano in the background begins, stones and burning coals are thrown upon the stage, the lava rolls forth and surrounds the kings, and they fall, consumed by fire, into the cracks which open in the earth.

The success of such a play at such a time may be imagined ; it is, moreover, proved by the fact that it drew forth imitations certainly of grovelling exactness—the Citizen Desbarreaux was not too proud to call his rival piece *Les Potentats foudroyés par la Montagne et la Raison, ou la Déportation des Rois de l'Europe* ; nor did he shrink from following Sylvain Maréchal into the least delicate of his details—in fact, he exaggerated the comicalities of Catherine to an extent that Rabelais could not well have exceeded. So did the gross vices of the Empress of Russia help to make more coarse the amusements of the *blouses* of France.

The events of the next year are well enough known. Tyranny succeeded tyranny ; and the execution of Robespierre, on July 27, 1794, was welcomed even more loudly than was the death of Louis only a year and a half before. The intolerable despotism of the Revolutionary Committees has often been described in novels and plays of later time ; and it is interesting to show that the stage of the period presented it in the same light, and in colours every whit as high. It is of course true that party spirit will colour contemporary caricature perhaps even more strongly than the imagination of posterity ; but all France, by an astonishing and universal enthusiasm of acceptance, recognised the truth of this picture. It does not even appear that the extreme Terrorists ventured to protest, with any energy, against the production of the one comedy which attacked them without the least shadow of disguise, and with unsurpassable ridicule and invective. *L'intérieur des Comités Révolutionnaires* was played at two theatres simultaneously for a hundred successive nights, was acted all over France, its first run in Paris being only suspended by the events of September, 1795, and its reproduction, six months afterwards, securing another run of nearly a hundred nights. People went to see it over and over again. One old man, who had been

imprisoned throughout the reign of Terror, took a box for the season and did not miss one performance of the play. "He was seen every night," we are told, "not losing a movement of the actors, his mouth half open, weeping with joy, as in ecstasy, clapping his hands, moving to and fro on his seat, and repeating, 'Oh, how I am being revenged on those rascals!'"

The author of the play, Ducancel, has himself told us how he came to compose it, and in how rapid and haphazard a way it was written. Dining at home with some friends, he says, he turned the conversation upon the ridiculous mistakes, the crass ignorance, and the stupid brutalities of the agents of the Revolutionary Committees. "There was not one of my companions who had not had some dispute or some business with his Committee" (*i.e.* that of his district). "At dessert, my brain became excited and heated; I rose abruptly and said to my companions, 'My heart is too full; I must relieve it; I am going to write a comedy on the Revolutionary Committees.' I went to my study; I took up my pen, without any definite plan. Exposition, plot, conclusion—I had foreseen and prepared none of them. I thought of putting together, within the compass of an ordinary act, a certain number of scenes drawn from my memory (*à tiroir*). Soon facts, details, and incidents presented themselves to my recollection in crowds. My pen was not rapid enough to fix them upon the paper, so much was I filled with the *facit indignatio versum*. I finished composing, almost at one burst, the first eight scenes, and I perceived that almost all my materials were yet to be made use of. I decided then to extend my piece to the length of two acts, to unite the scenes and bind them to a dramatic story which should present unity of time and place. My second act terminated, my provision of facts and anecdotes was not yet exhausted. Come, let us have three acts!"

And at three he stopped. *Les Aristides Modernes, ou l'Intérieur des Comités Révolutionnaires* was written, accepted, learnt and put upon the stage in twenty-seven days,* and its triumphant success is described by the author with that delightful absence of false modesty—and indeed of any modesty at all—so characteristic of his nation. However, it is evident that he did not exaggerate his triumph—which was so great that it compelled the abolition of the very name of the thing that he attacked; thenceforth the committees were called, until they ceased altogether to exist, *comités de surveillance*.

The play has real merit, though not of a very high order; it is even now thoroughly amusing, and many of the comic scenes would be worth translating were it not for the impossibility of reproducing the fun of the bad French—one of the chief comic characters is a perfect Paris cockney, the other a Gascon. The plot is very slight, but sufficient for

* It was produced on the 8 *Floréal*, an *III*. (April 27, 1795) at the Théâtre de la Cité-Variétés.

such a work : a family of respectable (and somewhat prosy) citizens are attacked, with every device of treachery and brutality, by the scoundrels who form the *Comité* of Dijon *—a set of thieves, lackeys, porters, hair-dressers, who have become politicians and assumed the names of Aristides, Cato, Scævola, Brutus, Torquatus; the honest people are reduced to despair, the scamps are triumphant, cheating, lying, thieving, murdering at their will, when, at the darkest moment, comes the news that the despotic triumvirate has been overthrown—Robespierre, St. Just, and Couthon are dead—and France is freed from another set of tyrants.

Of the last play of which I have spoken it will not be necessary to give any very detailed description, the piece is of so common a type of caricature; it is this one fact alone that makes it interesting. At the date of its production—1796—the Revolutionary period proper was over, and people could amuse and enjoy themselves like their neighbours and their forefathers. An individual figure of an old comic type, at that moment peculiarly *à propos*, was created—*Madame Angot*, the *parvenue* fishwoman, as invented by Maillot and embodied by Corse, became the rage. Society topsy-turvy was represented, in a rough but sufficiently telling way, in her history; and the little play was not only a success itself, but was followed by numberless imitations almost more successful than the original, *Le Mariage de Nanon* (Madame's daughter), *Le Repentir de Madame Angot*, *Les Dernières Folies de Madame Angot*, these all by Maillot himself; *Madame Angot au Sérail de Constantinople*, by Aude, *Madame Angot au Malabar, ou la Nouvelle Veuve*, by Aude and Lion, followed and (no doubt) resembled each other—even in their success. *Madame Angot* was, in fact, the Mrs. Brown of the period; and even in our own days her daughter, aided by the lively and perfectly vulgar music of Lecocq, has revived her fame.†

In reading these plays, one sees a series of pictures, not well drawn, perhaps, but drawn from the life; one discovers, at all events, what seemed the most striking features of the Revolution to those who stood face to face with it. The noble aspirations with which it began, the brutal horror and vulgarity which succeeded them, are shown here more vividly than they can be in the portraits of later literary artists, great though these may be; and—which is a valuable quality—there is no pretence of an impossible impartiality. These are either the sayings of the men themselves who helped to make the French Revolution, or those of their deadly enemies. We see exactly what Robespierre appeared to a Girondist, what a *sans-culotte* appeared to himself; their objects, their pretexts, as they grew and changed, are put before us briefly and in the

* Singled out as the only one in France which protested against the execution of Robespierre.

† It is perhaps worth noting that the famous quarrel-scene in *La Fille de Madame Angot*—musically almost the best thing in the opera—is imitated from the original play.

main correctly—the audiences were too well-informed to admit any great perversion of facts. And the dramatic form is invaluable: we hear men speak, argue, exchange repartee and abuse, as they cannot in journal, pamphlet, or history.

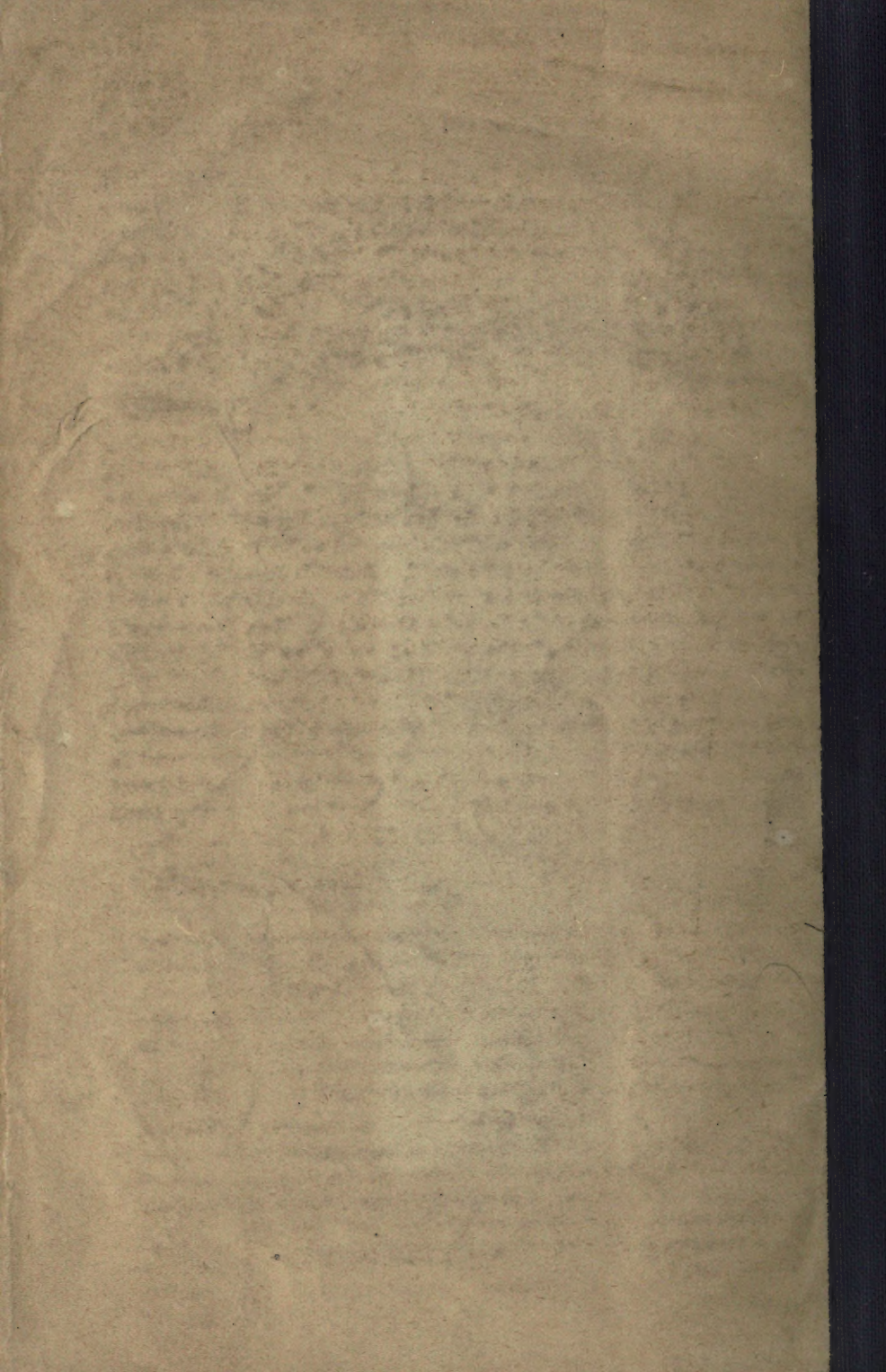
What would not one give, I repeat, for such a dramatic history of the English Revolution, were it possible? The material is so much finer—there is such grandeur, mingled with such absurdity, in the Puritans, with Sergeants Fight-the-good-fight and Bind-their-kings-in-chains, such grace and chivalrous comedy in the cavaliers. The gloom and Biblical eloquence of a Fifth Monarchy *Dernier Jugement des Rois* should be magnificent, though one can hardly imagine the Moderate party putting Cromwell and Harrison on the stage, as the Girondists pilloried Robespierre and Marat.

It is a question, however, whether the practical issues on which our Revolution was decided were as well fitted for the theatre as the broader issues of the French. Their noble war-cry was "Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood"—ours was but "No ship-money!" To be sure, we attained our object, and gained a freedom which, after a slight reaction, has been widening ever since; while their excesses damaged for a time the cause of liberty throughout the world. But this does not affect the dramatic capability of the two struggles: the sentiments which would be put into the mouth of the hero of a French republican drama would awaken sympathy over all the world—those of an English Puritan would, as a rule, be hardly comprehensible out of England.

For these questions, however, and the hundred others which arise out of the subject, this is not the place. I have only wished to draw attention to a somewhat neglected series of historical pictures, unsurpassed in vigour, in variety, and even in a rough and general accuracy; and I need now only add that the nine or ten here mentioned are but a very small proportion of those accessible to students of French literature.

E. B.





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The Revolution and the stage in France.

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